Dear WebMASSters,

We have recently learned about some security vulnerabilities in popular file formats that we thought you should be aware of. There are only limited actions you can take as an information provider, but you should be aware of the user trust issues associated with providing materials in binary file formats.

Word, Excel, and PDF have all been found to have weaknesses that would allow disreputable people to embed commands in files that could give them control of the PC somebody is using when they open the file. For the sake of your users, you should be sure to run an up-to-date virus scan on all documents you plan to post on the web. You should realize that you are asking your users to trust you. (For yourselves, be sure you have up-to-date virus scanning enabled for all documents you download from the web and email.)

PDF fill-in forms have a more serious problem. When you fill in a PDF form, it - along with the data you enter - is stored in your computer's cache. This may not be an issue for you at work or home, but many of your users may be using shared computers, such as those at public libraries. If another user browses to the same PDF as you just filled out, he or she may be presented with the form you just filled out - with your data. This is an obvious privacy problem. Many state tax agencies, including the Massachusetts Department of Revenue, have removed all fill-in PDF forms from their public websites until a reliable solution is found. You should consider doing the same if you have forms that collect personal information, or at least disclose the risks to your users.

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